THE REAL JOHN BROWN

By His Friend, Frank B. Sanborn

FIFTY years ago, in the guerrilla warfare on the prairies of Kansas, which was a rehearsal for the four years' succession of defeats and victories in the Civil War, John Brown began to fix the attention of his country men and the world upon his daring acts, and three years later, in the autumn of 1859, his tragic fate and the echoes of his prophetic words in Virginia excited interest throughout Europe as well as in America. He died on the scaffold at Charlestown, now in West Virginia, after an imprisonment of six weeks, and a trial in the village court of Jefferson County, in which the emotion of millions was excited alternately by the astonishing acts to which the witnesses testified, and by the calm and resolute eloquence of the prisoner at the bar.

Of his address to the court after conviction for murder and treason, Emerson said a few years later, at the death of Abraham Lincoln, "Lincoln's brief speech at Gettysburg will not easily be surpassed by words on any recorded occasion. This and one other American speech, that of John Brown to the court that tried him, and a part of Kossuth's at Birmingham, can be compared only with each other, and with no fourth."

The speeding years have not lessened the interest of mankind in the life and death either of Lincoln or of Brown. Each succeeding generation inquires about this convict-hero, eager to know what kind of man he truly was. The time is sure to come when Brown will be regarded as a mythical personage, like David the shepherd, Arthur the King, and Tell the mountaineer; incarnating as they did some truth or cause dear to the human heart, but not flesh-and-blood men at all. His career, like theirs, had elements of romance and improbability; but he was a very real and actual person. Like Joan of Arc, he was peculiar and remarkable, one of those persons who appear from time to time as if to verify the saying, "Man alone can perform the impossible."

Remarkable Prescience of a Farmer

WHAT more impossible than that a village shepherd girl of France should lead her King's armies to victory?—unless it were this, that a sheep-farmer and wool-buyer of Ohio should foreshadow and rehearse the forcible emancipation of four million American slaves? This Brown did at a time when the general voice of mankind pronounced such a deed to be hopeless or atrociously criminal.

Historians have not dealt sagely with this typical character. They have too often looked at him through the wrong end of the telescope, with colored lenses and ill-adjusted focus. They have not seen that he was a rare type of hero, easily passing into the mythical; such as never fail to draw to themselves the wrath of the powerful, the love of the multitude. They are hunted down, imprisoned, murdered; but every blow they receive only makes them dearer to the heart of the humble. In heroes, faults are pardoned, crimes forgotten, exploits magnified, their life becomes a poem or a scripture, and they enter on that enviable earthly immortality which belongs to the story of a race.

John Brown, son of Owen and grandson of Captain John, who died in the army of General Washington in 1775, was a descendant of Peter Brown, a carpenter, who came to Plymouth in the Mayflower, along with Bradford and Standish. The son of this Pilgrim father removed to Windsor in Connecticut, and the most famous of his posterity was born at Torrington, Connecticut, May 9, 1800. His father, a cordwainer and tanner, migrated to Hudson, Ohio, in 1805, and there John was bred amid pioneers and Indians, and intended by Owen Brown, the deacon, for a minister. His father's cousin, the Rev. Heman Humphrey, was president of Amherst College, and John returned to New England at the age of eighteen to fit for that college. Study caused such weakness of sight that he gave up his hope of that education, went back to Hudson, set up a tannery of his own in 1819, and in June, 1820, married Dianthe Lusk, a descendant of the Adams family of Massachusetts. Owen Brown had brought up his fifteen children in the fear of God and the faith of Augustine and Calvin; at the age of eighty-five he was still living, a prosperous old man, at Hudson, and wrote (January 26, 1856) thus to his son John in Kansas:

From the Father of John Brown

DEAR SON JOHN AND OTHERS.—Your letters have come to hand very regularly in about twelve days, and are received with great satisfaction. They were looked for with great anxiety, as your wants, fears, health, and lives are very much on my mind. Here the voice of health is very general, and God's common mercies are proportioned to our wants; but spiritual blessings seem to be withholden, and the wicked walk on every side. My mind is very clear on most of my transactions, even from my childhood, and my sins are ever before me, which may God pardon through the merits of Christ. I have great anxiety for my children, even to the fourth generation.

I was once in conversation with old Deacon Wright about our children, when he told me he had a comfortable hope for all his children. Is there not great guilt lying on me that my life has not been as exemplary as Dea. E. Wright's? I can now follow most of my numerous family through most of their changes in life. I think, had my life been different, theirs would, most likely; but now I can do but little more than commit them to the care of a merciful God. Our fears of slavish tyranny are rather subsiding; it is always safe to put our confidence in God.

This tone of religious responsibility was inherited by John Brown, who in all his activities looked toward God and the Bible for guidance. This strikingly appears by his letter of September 25, 1843, announcing to his son John the loss of four children of the second marriage (to Mary Ann Day in 1832). The afflicted father wrote from Richfield, near Akron:

God has seen fit to visit us with the pestilence, and four of our number sleep in the dust; four of us that are still living have been more or less unwell. On the 4th Sept., Charles was taken, and died on the 11th; about that time Sarah, Peter, and Austin were taken with the same complaint. They died on the 21st, 22nd, and 23rd, and were all buried together in one grave. This has been to us all a bitter cup indeed, and we have drunk deeply; but still the Lord reigneth, and blessed be His great and holy name forever!

In our sore affliction there is still some comfort. Sarah, like your own mother, during her sickness discovered great composure of mind and patience, together with strong assurance, at times, of meeting God in Paradise. She seemed to have no idea of recovering from the first, nor did she ever express the least desire that she might, but rather the reverse. We fondly hope that she is not disappointed. They were all children towards whom, perhaps, we might have felt a little partial; but they all now lie in a little row together. I am yet feeble from the same disorder, which may account for some of my blunders.

This is the language of that repressed and simple Puritanism in which these Mayflower descendants always lived. "Your own mother" was Dianthe Lusk, who for some years before her death had been insane, and from whom this son, John Brown, jr., may have inherited his occasional insanity. John Brown himself was never insane, but had the most perfect control of his own mind, from first to last.

Unlike his father Owen, worldly prosperity was not to be the lot of the Kansas hero. He engaged from time to time in several occupations, and was sometimes almost wealthy; but at the final settlement of each business he was left poor, and sometimes in debt. His wool merchandizing, which about 1846 brought him from Ohio to Massachusetts, where he lived in Springfield for a few years, began to suffer reverses in 1849. To counteract them, Brown determined to visit Europe and make a market there for the large stock of good wool which his firm, Perkins & Brown, had accumulated while the American market was falling. He sailed from Boston in the Cunarder Cambria, August 15.

Brown went through Belgium, a part of Germany and Switzerland, and then down into Northern Italy. On the Continent he began to inspect battlefields, beginning with Waterloo. His comments on the Austrian and French troops, whom he saw at reviews, were much to the point. The German farms, he thought, suffered from the custom of the laborers to live in villages, and not on the farm itself. By this time he had made himself a good farmer and stock breeder, and was an admirable judge and sorter of wool. But he had no luck with his shipment of American wool to Europe, and soon after his return in October his firm became involved in long lawsuits, and failed. His partner, Colonel Simon Perkins of Akron, when I saw him in 1875, spoke slightingly of Brown's business capabilities.

Organized Negroes to Resist Recapture

IN Springfield Brown had associated much with the colored families there, many of them being fugitive slaves. These he organized into a band to resist recapture. Before going abroad he had bought land of Gerrit Smith in North Elba, among the Adirondack woods, and took charge there, soon after his return, of a small colony of Negroes who had settled on land given them by Smith. There, as well as in Springfield, he sought colored recruits for his proposed invasion of the slave territory, a plan formed by Brown as early as 1838.

Brown established himself in a plain house in the town of North Elba, and gave employment to some of the few colored persons who accepted the gift of Smith, but found no colored recruits there. He did find a family of New Hampshire yeomen in those woods, cleairng land, which they had bought of Smith on long credit, and from these Thompsons he had chosen Henry for the husband of his eldest daughter Ruth and his soldier in Kansas; while two younger brothers, William and Dauphin Thompson, followed him to Harpers Ferry, and were slain there. Of another brother, Samuel, I purchased from himself and his brother, in August, 1857, one hundred and sixty acres of partially cleared land, to increase the farms of Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Ruth Thompson; "to put them in possession of the menas of supporting themselves," as the subscription paper drawn up by Amos Lawrence, father of Bishop Lawrence,